

3-18-08 -Group backs priests' stand on Braxton; names of those calling for resignation are released
BY GEORGE PAWLACZYK, Belleville News-Democrat (IL)

Voice of the Faithful, a national Catholic lay organization, has issued a statement supporting 46 Belleville Diocese priests who have asked Bishop Edward K. Braxton to resign.

A list of the 39 active and seven retired priests was made public Monday. Their letter calling for Braxton to step down because of misuse of donated funds and failure to communicate with priests was made public Friday.

The Rev. Jerry Wirth, pastor of St. Joseph Church in Olney and head of the diocese's Prebyteral Council, was one of the 46 signers and released the list of names to media. He said he will not comment further until after Easter.

John Ryan, chairman of Voice of the Faithful's National Priest Support Working Group, called the priests courageous in a written statement issued Monday.

"You set an example for the process you have undertaken, one that has been fully consultive, prayerful, explorative, and one that has exhausted all alternatives before publicly calling for the resignation of your bishop," he stated. "We hope and believe there will be widespread support for your courage and leadership at a time when diocesan priests crave good shepherds whose voices they can trust to lead them to unity of purpose."

Braxton, who has stated he will not talk with local reporters, could not be reached for comment. A chancery official said he did not know the bishop's whereabouts.

However, Braxton seemed to be referring to the call for his resignation when he made a cryptic comment at the end of morning services Sunday at St. Peter Cathedral.

Parishioner Kelly Casey said she heard Braxton say, "Things are not as they seem. Things are not as they seem."

And parishioner Gloria Schwartz said she thought the bishop said, "Things are not as they appear. Things are not as they appear."

The National Priest Support Working Group, which claims more than 30,000 members, played a role in forcing the resignation in 2002 of Cardinal Bernard Law, archbishop of Boston. Law stepped down in the wake of that city's widespread priest sex abuse scandal.

"The reasons we're supporting this is because one of the goals of Voices of the Faithful is to support priests of integrity. And we feel like the folks there have done everything right. They've tried to resolve it in different ways," said group member Bob Stewart, of Washington, D.C. "I think it's basically mistrust. His actions have manifested the fact that he's not been transparent. There hasn't been the transparency and accountability that Catholics have come to expect."

The call for Braxton to resign came after a two-hour meeting of 37 priests Wednesday at the American Legion Hall in Germantown. At that meeting, according to the Rev. Mark Stec, there was discussion about boycotting priest meetings called by Braxton and of sending all donations collected in the diocese directly to Catholic national headquarters in Washington, bypassing the chancery. But those ideas were scrapped.